Making the Nontraditional Traditional: Reimagining the College Campus with a Focus on Commuter Students

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Abstract

There is a fundamental disconnect between the students that colleges believe they serve and those that actually attend higher education institutions. Since the end of World War II and the introduction of the GI Bill, the student body has been shifting from the traditional White upper or middle-class male, 18-22 years old, who lives on campus and attends college full time (with no outside family or work obligations) (Pascarella, 2006) to students “who are older than typical college students, work because of financial necessity, belong to the first generation in their family to attend college, do not live on campus, attend part-time, or are members of minority racial groups” (Ogren, 2003, p. 640). The magnitude of this shift can be seen in data gathered by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which notes that “almost three-quarters of undergraduates are in some way ‘nontraditional’” (2011, p. 26). Despite this trend, higher education institutions have not adapted to the changing student body. Four-year colleges and universities continue to base their educational philosophy, policies, and services on the traditional, residential model, which is evident in scheduling and enrollment policies, the types of support offered to students, and the general expectation that their roles as students are the defining aspect of their identities.

Though the term “nontraditional” encompasses more than a student’s living arrangement, it is one of the central themes linking key markers of nontraditional classification: age, enrollment status, race, and employment. Specifically in regards to students who do not live on campus, their continued categorization as nontraditional is fascinating when one considers that eighty-five percent of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions do not reside on campus (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Thus, even though commuters vastly outnumber residential students, their experience is still viewed as not the “true” college experience. To remedy this situation, higher education institutions need to either adapt their services to better accommodate their students or implement policy changes that allow more nontraditional students to have the traditional, residential college experience.

In the Condition of Education 2002: Special Analyses, which includes an examination of nontraditional undergraduates, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) notes that “almost three-quarters of undergraduates are in some way ‘nontraditional’” (p. 26). More specifically, the Digest of Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) determined that in 2007-2008 eighty-five percent of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions did not live on campus; fifty-four percent lived off campus without family members, and thirty-one percent lived with parents or relatives. However, media depictions of college students and widely held stereotypes of who attends college (Bozick, 2007; Braxton et al, 2004) do not fit with these statistics. The stereotype of the typical college student as a White middle-class male, 18-22 years old, who lives on campus and attends college full time (with no outside family or work obligations) (Pascarella, 2006) is not the actual majority. Utilizing data from the Digest of Education Statistics 2010 (NCES, 2011a) and The Condition of Education 2011 (NCES, 2011), Table 1 summarizes the changes in these characteristics.

Table 1

*Percentage of students with nontraditional characteristics: 1976-2008*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristic | 1976 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2008 |
| Male a | 52.8% | 48.6% | 45.5% | 43.9% | 42.9% |
| Whiteb | 82% | 81.4% | 77.6% | 68.3% | 63.3% |
| Not Employedc | 64.7% (1975) | 60% | 54.3% | 48% | 54.7% |
| 24 and underd | 72.2% | 62.5% | 58.1% | 60.8% | 61.2% |
| Full timea | 61% | 58.7% | 56.6% | 58.8% | 61.5% |

a Taken from Table 197. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by attendance status, sex of student, and control of institution: Selected years, 1947 through 2009 (NCES, 2011a, p. 291).

b Taken from Table 235. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, attendance status, and level of student: Selected years, 1976 through 2009 (NCES, 2011a, p. 331).

c Taken from Table A-45-1. Percentage of 16- to 24-year-old college students who were employed, by attendance status, hours worked per week, and institution level and control: Selected years, October 1970 through October 2009 (NCES, 2011, p. 290)

d Calculated from data presented in Table 199. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by sex, age, and attendance status: Selected years, 1970 through 2019 (NCES, 2011a, p. 293).

It is important to note that all of the data includes students from both two-year and four-year institutions. The actual percentages of students who are employed while at college are likely to be higher than those reported in the table due to the inclusion of only students under the age of 25 in the report. Despite this discrepancy, the table does show that, in general, the number of White male students who are under 24 years old and are not employed while attending college is decreasing. The data on full time and part time enrollment is surprising, especially in light of the contradictory findings in the Condition of Education 2002: Special Analyses (NCES, 2002), which includes an examination of nontraditional undergraduates. This report highlights the prevalence of part time enrollment, noting that 47.9% of undergraduate students in 1999-2000 attended on a part time basis. It is possible that the differences in findings are the result of discrepancies in definitions of terms and included student populations.

Though the numbers of the stereotypical traditional college student are decreasing, the myth continues to pervade the conceptualization of higher education. Acknowledging this disconnect, Newbold, Mehta & Forbus (2011) point out that the “traditional student of yesterday is rare in today’s world. There are not many of the typical residential colleges in which a full-time student enters immediately after high school, lives in a dormitory, and rarely works because the parents are their source of support” (p. 141-142). In an effort to explore this paradox between the outdated myth and reality, and inform a series of policy recommendations, this review of related literature will address four central themes that seem to inhibit the ability of higher education institutions to foster commuter student success: the residential model of the American college system, the variation in definitions of nontraditional and commuter students (and how these definitions intersect), the diversity of the nontraditional and commuter student population, and the limited applicability of widely used student development frameworks. This information will help to shape a series of policy and future research recommendations that address the congruency between the actual and perceived college student population.

**Central Themes Framing the Traditional/Nontraditional Disconnect**

**Residential Model of American Colleges**

From the very beginning of the establishment of the higher education system in the United States, commuter students were not included as the target population (Jacoby, 1989; Likins, 1986). The American system is based on the residential college model of British institutions, most notably Oxford and Cambridge. The most prestigious American universities, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, all incorporate the residential philosophy into their educational mission (Jacoby, 1989). However, the residential view of college as both home and academic center does not reflect the actual experience of the vast majority of American college students who do not live on campus (Dugan, Garland, Jacoby & Gasiorski, 2008; Jacoby, 2000; Wilson, 2003). Since the end of World War II, there has been a continual increase in the number of veterans, older students, students of color, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds attending college; these students are much more likely to commute to campus due to a variety of reasons (Chickering, 1974; Jacoby, 1989), including family responsibilities, marital status, financial concerns, and employment.

**Treating commuters as resident students.**

Despite the increase in numbers, colleges have not adapted their approach or services to address these changes (Likins, 1986). Dugan et al. (2008) note that colleges continue to utilize “programs and interventions designed for residential students with commuter student populations under the assumption that the effect on learning will be equivalent” (p. 283). The practice of ignoring or misunderstanding the unique needs of the commuter student “silent majority” (Wilson, 2003) is evident in a series of myths about commuters identified by Rhatigan (1986). These myths include the belief that commuters are “less committed to their education” (p. 4), “are less able academically” (p. 5), and “have no interest in the campus beyond their classes” (p. 5). Despite the lack of empirical evidence to support these claims, colleges continue to function under these assumptions (Dugan et al., 2008; Inman & Pascarella, 1997).

Relying on these faulty assumptions allow universities to blame the students for their limited affiliation with and higher degree of attrition from the institution. It is easy to fall into this pattern as “the undergraduate experience of many college and university faculty and staff was residential” (Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983, p. 62). Thus, faculty and staff members’ frame of reference for how colleges should function is based on a concept that is not applicable to many contemporary college campuses. Unlike the residential experience of faculty and staff members, commuter students are likely to spend little time on campus outside of classes, have less contact with faculty outside of class, participate in fewer extracurricular activities, be more concerned with finances, care for family members, deal with conflicting time commitments, and not necessarily see themselves as primarily college students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2011). The disconnect between faculty and staff expectations and student reality can have a detrimental effect on students. For example,

traditional events and marketing approaches go mostly unnoticed by busy commuters who shuffle to and from their classes and do not partake of the traditional student experience. Commuter students may express feelings of being treated like a second-class student, and come to resent paying fees for services they do not use, while many of their particular needs (such as convenient parking) go unmet. (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2011, p. 150-151).

More specifically, common functions associated with traditional student life – dining hall meal plans, assistance in dealing with homesickness, parent and family weekend programs, and the utilization of designated, daytime faculty office hours – are irrelevant to students who are not on campus during meal times, are still living at home (often with their families of origin), and are unable to attend limited office hours due to competing time commitments.

**Comparing commuters to resident students.**

Instead of exploring the implications of this marginalized experience, much of the existing research is focused on comparing residential and commuter students (Banning & Hughes, 1986; Dugan et al., 2008; Jacoby, 1989) and identifying commuter student deficits. Chickering (1974) published the first major study of commuter students, *Commuting Versus Resident Students*, which has shaped and reinforced the misperceptions and negative stereotypes of commuters (Jacoby, 1989) and the myths identified by Rhatigan. Chickering’s view of commuters as “the have nots” and resident students as “the haves” (p. 49) on the basis of pre-college characteristics of lower socio-economic status, limited past achievements, and less educated parents supports the view that commuters are functioning at a deficit, instead of simply experiencing college from a unique and valid perspective (Jacoby, 1989). The entire explanation for the lower levels of commuter satisfaction, engagement, and academic success found in Chickering’s (1974) quantitative comparison of commuter and resident students is focused on the influence of pre-college student characteristics, and ignores the role of the institution in creating and perpetuating these trends (Banning & Hughes, 1986). In other words, commuter student disengagement is assumed to result from students’ disadvantaged backgrounds, instead of the institution’s failure to acknowledge and accommodate the unique needs of commuter students. Furthermore, Jacoby (1989) challenges the validity of Chickering’s findings on the basis that “in this work, the residential college experience is the benchmark against which all others should be measured. In it, the academic goals and developmental tasks of resident students remain unchallenged as the ‘correct’ ones” (p. 22). The commuter student experience is thus seen as non-normative and marginal.

**Definitions of Student Populations**

**Nontraditional students.**

The marginalization of commuter student status is exacerbated by its inclusion under the umbrella term of “nontraditional”. While the NCES (2002) report comments on the size of the nontraditional undergraduate student population, it also admits that the term “nontraditional” is imprecise. To illustrate this point, Table 2 maps the components of the definition of nontraditional students used by various research studies.

Table 2

*Definitions of nontraditional students*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Definition Components | Sources | | | |
| Live off-campus | Gilman et al (2006) | Ogren (2003) | Bean & Metzner (1985) |  |
| Employed at least part-time | Gilman et al (2006) | Ogren (2003) | Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011) | NCES (2002) (full-time employment) |
| Part-time enrollment | Orgren (2003) | Bean & Metzner (1985) | NCES (2002) |  |
| Over the age of 25 | Gilman et al (2006) | Tan & Pope (2005) | Wyatt (2011) | Bean & Metzner (1985) (over age of 24) |
| Over the age of 21 | Taniguchi & Kaufman (2005) |  |  |  |
| Older than typical students | Ogren (2003) | Bean & Metzner (1985) |  |  |
| First generation | Ogren (2003) | Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011) |  |  |
| Racial or ethnic minority | Ogren (2003) | Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011) | Westbrook & Sedlacek (1991) |  |
| Lower socioeconomic status | Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011) |  |  |  |
| Financially independent | NCES (2002) |  |  |  |
| Has dependents | NCES (2002) |  |  |  |
| Married | Gilman et al (2006) |  |  |  |
| Single parent | NCES (2002) |  |  |  |
| No high school diploma (GED or other certificate) | NCES (2002) |  |  |  |
| Did not attend college directly after high school | NCES (2002) |  |  |  |

There are considerably more articles reviewed for this analysis than are listed in Table 2, but only those that clearly identify a definition are included. The lack of one unifying definition is problematic in that a characteristic that one institution views as nontraditional, might be seen as traditional by another institution. Therefore, there is little consistency regarding best practices, demographic information, research, support personnel, and necessary resources. For example, the Rhode Island College Vision 2015 Strategic Plan (2010) mentions nontraditional students under the section on facilities, noting that “consideration of issues of accessibility will promote the College’s service to nontraditional students” (p. 7). In this sense, it appears that nontraditional students are students with physical disabilities. However, the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University provides support services for nontraditional students, which includes “returning adults whose formal education has been interrupted, students needing to pursue higher education on a part-time basis, postbaccalaureate students pursuing a second undergraduate degree or major, nonmatriculating students, international students, and veterans” (2011, ¶ 1). At Western Oregon University, Non-Traditional Student Services supports students who “are over the age of 25, are returning to school after an extended break, or have children” (n.d., ¶ 1). Thus, the conversations, policies, and programs surrounding nontraditional students would be markedly different at Rhode Island College, Rutgers University, and Western Oregon University as a result of the differing definitions.

While the studies often do not stipulate that a student needs to possess all of the components to be considered nontraditional, possession of at least one of the components appears to confer nontraditional status. For example, Bean & Metzner (1985), who are cited by many other researchers (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; NCES, 2002; Ogren, 2003; Tan & Pope, 2005; Wolfe, 1993) identify age, enrollment status, and residence as the three key markers of nontraditional students. As such, they define a nontraditional student as “older than 24, or does not live in a campus residence (e.g. is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors” (p. 489).

The five most common components of definitions of nontraditional students, as shown in Table 2, are employment, age, residence, enrollment status, and race. As will be discussed later in the review, these components are somewhat interrelated. It is interesting to note that there is disagreement over the exact age for inclusion; some studies vaguely note that nontraditional students are “older than typical college students” (Ogren, 2003). Setting up this dichotomy of typical versus atypical appears to reinforce the notion that “older” students are outside of the norm. Most studies use the general guideline of 25 years of age and older, except for Taniguchi & Kaufman (2005) who include students ages 21 and older. To explain this decision, Taniguchi & Kaufman (2005) note that “although researchers often use the cut-off age of 25 to define nontraditional students, this would result in the exclusion of men and women who become parents and go on to college in their early 20s” (p. 918). This attention to students who have children in their early 20s incorporates the belief that childbearing is a nontraditional student experience and, furthermore, does not address students who may have had children before the age of 21.

In terms of family status, the Condition of Education report (2002) is the only study to identify single parenthood and dependents as nontraditional indicators. Furthermore, it is also the only study to include high school diploma and directness of college entry as components. The discrepancies between the NCES definition and those of other studies are significant in that it is the way that the United States federal government is identifying nontraditional students. Thus, it is curious that the NCES definition does not incorporate one of Bean & Metzner’s (1985) key factors: residence.

**Commuter students**.

While not as complicated as the definition of nontraditional students, there is also some disagreement over the definition of commuter students. As illustrated in Table 3, not living in college-owned housing appears to be the main definition, however, there is no consensus as to if students who live in temporary off-campus residences for the purposes of attending college are considered commuter students. Again this lack of agreement can create issues for consistency in policies, best practices, services, and resources related to commuter students.

Table 3

*Definitions of commuter students*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sources | Definitions |
| Dugan et al (2008) | Not living in college-owned housing |
| Ortman (1995) | Not living in college-owned housing |
| Jacoby (2000) | Not living in college-owned housing |
| Newbold, Mehta & Forbus (2011) | “Commuting students are considered to be living outside of the county where the school operates and have not relocated to attend the school” (p. 147). |
| Inman & Pascarella (1997) | Not living in university residence halls (excluding students who live in off-campus apartments and sorority and fraternity houses) |
| NCES (2011) | Living off campus without family members and living off campus with family members (derived from data collected through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)) |

For example, Commuter Student Services at the University of California, San Diego seems to view commuter students predominantly as those who live in off-campus apartments, as their programs center on finding housing, being a renter, and information for landlords (2011). Commuter Student Services at the University of Memphis defines a commuter student as “one who DOES NOT live on campus or in any University-owned property, and must utilize various modes of transportation to travel to and from classes” – emphasis included in original citation - (2011, ¶ 1) and seems to focus their services around transportation and lounge space (though they do also host an off-campus housing fair). So, as with the myriad of definitions of nontraditional students, the disagreement over which students are considered commuters has important implications for how these students are perceived and served.

**Diversity and Intersectionality of Commuter Student Characteristics**

**Age and Residence**

While all of the aspects of a student’s nontraditional status are individually important, a student’s identity as a commuter is central in that it is highly related to the other aspects of nontraditional status and that it represents a disconnect from the residential college model. With the exception of a few universities that offer family housing or have a small number of older students who decide to live in the residence halls, all older students (those above the age of 25) are commuters. Some universities have specific policies that address the age of students in the residence halls:

* Lincoln University: “All unmarried students under 21 years of age, whose primary domicile is beyond a 60-mile radius of Lincoln University, are required to live in the University residence halls for four consecutive semesters” (2011, ¶ 1).
* Nazareth College: “Visitation in residence halls are interpreted as a social visit of relatively short duration. A guest is defined as an individual, age 18-25, who is not a Nazareth College student. A visitor is defined as an individual, age 18-25, who is a student at Nazareth College, but might live off campus or in another room, suite or apartment” (2011, ¶ 1).
* Luther College: “All full-time students are required to live in college-owned housing unless married, of nontraditional age (23 years or older), or commuting from their legal guardians’ homes” (2011, ¶ 3).
* College of Charleston: “**Is there any housing for married or graduate students?**  
  Presently we do not provide housing for married or graduate students. Our priority is undergraduate students because of the demand for on-campus housing. **Is there an age limit for living on-campus?** Yes. The age limit is 24. The residence halls are set up for traditional students. At this time, we do not offer older student housing” (2011, ¶ 20).

According to these policies older students are not afforded the opportunity to live on campus, forbidden to visit fellow students who live on campus, or exempt from the traditional policy of requiring students to live on campus.

**Enrollment Status and Residence**

Furthermore, most universities require that students enroll full time in order to live on campus, which eliminates the opportunity for part time students to live in the residence halls.

* University of New Haven: “To be eligible for on-campus housing, you must be a full-time undergraduate student making normal progress toward a degree” (n.d., ¶ 3).
* University of Virginia: Housing Division General Provisions state that the University is authorized to “give priority to a full-time enrolled student over a part-time student” (2011, ¶ 5).
* Fairleigh Dickinson University: “If a resident fails to enroll or maintain full time status, or fails to pay fees, the resident agrees to vacate the premises within 24 hours after original notification. Failure to do so will result in room and board charges accruing and disciplinary action being taken” (2009, ¶ 3).
* Valparaiso University: “Part-time, graduate, and law students are welcome to apply to live on-campus, however first priority for housing is given to full-time undergraduates. The University reserves the right to deny housing to individuals who are not full-time undergraduate students” (n.d., ¶ 3).

As seen in these examples, part time students are either completely barred from living on campus or allowed to apply, but are given lower priority. Thus, part time students are typically commuter students.

**Employment and Residence**

Though not all students who are employed while attending college are commuters, there is some evidence that commuters generally work at least one job and/or commute in order to save money. Bozick (2007) confirms this relationship, commenting that “two options for partially defraying the costs of college are to work while enrolled and to live at home” (p. 263). Ogren (2003), in discussing the history of normal schools, which have a long history of educating commuter students to enter the field of teaching, stresses that “present-day students attend part-time and commute *because* they cannot afford to attend full-time or live on campus and/or their family or life commitments prohibit them from devoting themselves exclusively to the pursuit of higher education” (p. 646). Furthermore, employment is often listed as one of the main demands drawing students’ time and attention away from academic pursuits (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Stage, 2008; Wolfe, 1993). Gilman et al (2006) even include employment as part of their definition of a commuter campus: “Commuter campuses have a large number of part-time, older, married, and working students who reside off campus” (p. 19). Unfortunately, with rising tuition costs (and room and board fees), decreasing grant funding, and accumulating debt through student loans, many students have no other choice than to work while attending college (Bozick, 2007; Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007).

**Race and Residence**

Again, while not all students of color commute, “minority students who attend commuter institutions often have jobs, live away from campus, and have demanding family responsibilities” (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 49). This sentiment is echoed by Turley (2009), who notes that “the ability to attend college close to home is often among the most important factors that U.S. high school students, especially minorities and the socioeconomically disadvantaged, consider” (p. 126). Students of color also seem to be working more hours than their White counterparts. According to the Condition of Education 2010 (NCES, 2011) of full-time undergraduate students, 5.4% of White students, 6.5% of Black students, and 8.5% of Hispanic students work more than 35 hours each week. In addition to employment and family responsibilities, the realities of racism may discourage students of color from living on campus. Studies have found that the residence hall racial climate can be hostile to students of color (Johnson, 2003; Solarzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000), which may influence their decision to live at home.

**Limited Applicability of Widely Used Student Development Theory Frameworks**

**Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure**

The marginality of the commuter student experience is exacerbated by the reliance on student development theory that is based on research conducted with residential students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011), most notably Tinto’s (1987) theory of student departure and the related interactionalist theory. Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004) discuss the immense influence of Tinto due to the paradigmatic stature of his work. More specifically, they explain that “paradigmatic status connotes the considerable consensus among scholars of college student departure concerning the potential validity of Tinto’s theory” (p. 7). Tinto’s (1987) synthesis of the existing research on college student retention, including the National Longitudinal Study of high school data, and looking at that data through the lens of Emile Durkheim’s study of suicide resulting from social isolation, led to the development of the theory of student departure. This theory centers on the notion that “some degree of social and intellectual integration must exist as a condition for continued persistence” (Tinto, 1987, p. 119). Simply put, if a student does not feel connected to the campus community he or she is more likely to drop out. While this concept might seem like common sense, it counters the belief that students drop out solely due to poor classroom performance. While there are students for whom this statement is true, “less than 15% of all institutional departures on the national average take the form of academic dismissal” (Tinto, 1987, p. 53).

**Critique of Tinto’s Theory’s Applicability to Nontraditional Students**

Though this data is a bit outdated, Tinto’s theory continues to serve as the basis for much of the current student involvement research (Baker, 2007; Cabrera et al., 1999; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Locks et al., 2008; Museus, 2008). Baker (2007) criticizes Tinto’s generalization that all students, regardless of race, assimilate to the dominant campus culture using the same process, noting that “his theory does not adequately account for the experiences of minority college students” (p. 276). Yosso et al (2009) are also critical of Tinto’s theory, taking issue with his insistence that students need to separate themselves from their home communities and leave “behind their previous attitudes and behaviors” (p. 677) in order to become integrated into the campus community and graduate. To the contrary, students of color often find strength in the support of their families (Turley, 2009) and need the counterspaces of cultural centers and ethnic student organizations to maintain their sanity and sense of self (Guiffrida, 2003). It is through these counterspaces that many students of color form connections to the campus community and achieve a sense of integration.

Tinto’s central proposition that social integration is positively related to persistence is a valuable contribution to student development theory. However, it is seriously limited by the conceptualization of appropriate pathways to integration, which is based on dominant White ideology. This ideology assumes that leaving one’s old life behind and concentrating one’s efforts on adopting new attitudes that align with the cultural norms of the institution is correlated to college success.

The focus on social integration is also limited by its basis in the residential social system. Karp, Hughes & O’Gara (2010-2011), through their work with community college students, propose a reframing of Tinto’s theory to better address the development and retention of commuter students. Through their qualitative study of matriculated community college students, they found that some of the students were able to attain a level of integration, which they define as “having a sense of belonging on campus” (p. 75), through information networks that they formed in the classroom. Thus, Tinto’s separation of academic and social integration does not seem to be applicable to commuter students for whom class meetings are usually the only time that they spend on campus, therefore these academic encounters are their main opportunity for social integration. Other research supports the idea of the centrality of academic encounters; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon (2004) found that “the probability of student departure from a commuter college or university decreases for students who participate in communities of learning” (p. 40). Similarly, Braxton, Milem & Sullivan (2000) found that the college classroom “functions as a gateway for student involvement in the academic and social communities of a college” (p. 1, ¶ 4). Instead of lamenting the lack of commuter student involvement in traditional co-curricular and extracurricular activities, it could be more useful to focus on the relationships that they form in the classroom and how to utilize these relationships to foster a vibrant college community in which commuter students feel as if they are “first-class” citizens.

**Conclusion**

Creating a community in which commuter students are treated as “first-class” citizens would require higher education institutions to move beyond the residential model that was designed to serve a specific population of students, which has been decreasing in numbers since the GI Bill helped to expand access to these institutions. Unfortunately, the deeply held stereotypical notions of the typical college student tend to override the reality of the contemporary student who is busy rushing from job to campus to home to tend to his/her multiple responsibilities. In order to come to terms with the shift that has been taking place in the college student population, higher education professionals need to either accept that the formerly typical college student is disappearing and provide services that are more applicable to “nontraditional” students, or remove the barriers preventing nontraditional students from enjoying the residential experience. There is a reason why higher education is so infatuated with the residential model – study after study has shown that living on campus positively contributes to student development and achievement (Chickering, 1974; Flowers, 2004; Inman & Pascarella, 1997; Pascarella, 2006; Pike, 2002; Schudde, 2011). If higher education professionals are to continue the overwhelming preference of the residential experience, they will need to reconceptualize the institution to make a place for students who are older, of color, attend part time, are employed, and have families to join the on campus residential community.

**Recommendations**

**Policy**

**Removing the barriers to on-campus living.**

* Offer older student and family housing in order to give these students an opportunity to live on campus.
* Designate certain residence halls as pet-friendly to foster a family-friendly environment.
* Offer childcare services on campus.
* Raise money to fund grants that will help to lessen the burden of the necessity of working while attending college.
* Relax on campus student employment regulations to allow students to work more than twenty hours per week. This limitation leads many students to work off campus or hold multiple jobs in order to make ends meet, which takes away from their focus on academic pursuits.
* Provide scholarships to cover on campus living expenses.

**Redefining student services for the current student population.**

***Definitions.***

* Stop calling these students nontraditional! On many campuses they constitute the majority of the student population. As the proportion of older students, and other seemingly “nontraditional” groups, continue to increase, these students must be integrated into the conceptualization of the image of a college student.
* Establish a standard definition of commuter students in order to ensure more consistent services, data collection and analysis, and identification of student needs.

***Classroom as “Gateway to Student Involvement”.***

* Encourage faculty to incorporate active learning in the classroom in an effort to foster relationships between students and with the instructor.
* Make announcements about college-sponsored events and programs during class meetings.
* Create class text message lists so faculty members can notify students class cancelations to avoid unnecessary trips to campus.
* Encourage faculty to “identify part-time students, closely monitor their progress, and provide support if needed” (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, p. 925).
* Offer mandatory first-year seminar courses for all students through which they can form connections to other students, faculty members, and student affairs and other support staff.
* Make class lectures available on CD and through podcasts to allow students to listen to the material while commuting.

***Scheduling.***

* “Arrange classes, services, and events at times and in locations that assist the student’s ability to take advantage of offerings” (Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983, p. 68).
* Organize courses in blocks of time in order to limit the need for commuter students to leave and come back to campus.

***Support programs.***

* Tailor orientation programs to the specific needs and characteristics of commuter students.
* Implement learning communities that do not require a residential component.
* Offer the following services: lockers, valet parking, discounts at gas stations, webpage with link to area traffic information, and hybrid courses (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2011).
* Welcome students’ family members and off campus friends at college-sponsored events.
* Host programs within the students’ home communities so they are not required to commute back to campus in order to attend.

***Finances.***

* Support tuition reimbursement programs through students’ employers.

**Future Research**

* Build upon the work of Karp, Hughes & O’Gara (2010-2011) to revise Tinto’s theory of student departure to better address the commuter student and student of color experience.
* Critically review all of the major frameworks of college student development theory (Chickering, Astin, Erikson, etc.) to assess if they are based on research that only includes residential students and/or are framed in residential-dominated ideology.
* Take into consideration the diversity of the commuter student population when conducting research. It is virtually impossible to find any data that breaks down the commuter student population according to race, enrollment status, length of commute, employment, or other useful variables. This lack of disaggregation makes it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions that are applicable to the subpopulations within the larger commuter student definition.
* Focus research questions less on commuter student deficits and more on identifying their needs and if those needs are met by the institution.
* Conduct environmental scans to assess the accessibility of university services and support programs for commuter students.
* Be mindful of the use of terms such as typical, normal, and traditional in referring to student experiences and characteristics. Conceptualizing certain students as non-normative contributes to the reinforcement of outsider status and marginality.
* Assess the messages that individual campuses send through their admissions tours, promotional materials, websites, policies, and open house programs to evaluate if they place an emphasis on the residential experience.
* Investigate the effectiveness of family student housing, child care services, and other innovative programs of positively influencing social integration and retention. Based on this research, create a model of commuter-inclusive best practices.

Through these policy and future research recommendations higher education institutions can hopefully make progress toward eliminating the second-class status of those identified as nontraditional. Reexamining the term nontraditional and its relation to the actual college-going population can help to change the perception of who belongs on a college campus. Conducting research that explores the various subgroups within the nontraditional and commuter student populations will help faculty, staff, and administrators to better understand the experiences and characteristics of these students, as well as to acknowledge the fundamental differences between their college years and those of contemporary students. Furthermore, this research will help to gauge the pervasiveness of the residential model and the level at which it is embedded in campus culture. As the college-going population continues to move away from the stereotype of the White middle-class male, 18-22 years old, who lives on campus and attends college full time (with no outside family or work obligations) (Pascarella, 2006), it is imperative that institutions reimagine their campuses in order to remain relevant, effective, and respected places of higher learning.

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